

A Note on Albania

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Hard facts about the religious situation in Albania have been hard to come by. The section on Albania in *Discretion and Valour** was the least satisfactory. But the recent break in the close relations between Albania and China shows that something is moving. Sooner or later there will emerge more ways of penetrating the curtain of secrecy. Even now a systematic enquiry for crumbs of information from the Albanian minorities in Yugoslavia and Southern Italy would begin to build up a picture. And this should be done. But so far in Keston College we have lacked resources to study Albania as we would wish. Unfortunately none of us knows Albanian. But there are strong links between the Greek province of Epiros and Southern Albania which the Greeks call Northern Epiros. The population is mixed on both sides of the border and many Greek families have relatives in Albania.

In these circumstances some news – if not much – does come across the border. And it is possible to read the Albanian newspapers which, like those in other communist countries, sometimes reveal more than they intend. The relevant information is now being collected in Greece and some of it is published in modern Greek, a language which is more widely accessible than Albanian. I recommend particularly *To Lykophos Ton Theon Stin Alvania* (The Twilight of the Gods in Albania, 72 pp. no price), published in Chicago in 1976 by the Panepirotic Federation of America and Canada.†

Albania is the only country in the world where all manifestations of religion are forbidden by law and, when detected, are severely punished. Yet it is clear that religious faith and religious practice continue. The pamphlet referred to above is valuable for giving Greek translations of

* *Discretion and Valour* by Trevor Beeson, Collins, 1974.

† *The Fulfilled Promise* by Gjon Sinishta (published in Santa Clara, California, Library of Congress Catalogue 76-57433, \$7.95) adds to our knowledge from another point of view. In addition to much interesting background material about the Albanian past, this book gives a moving picture of the suffering and Christian heroism of Roman Catholic Albanians in the early years of communist rule.

a number of articles from the Albanian press. We print two extracts from these on pp. 10-11.

The general picture which emerges is surprisingly like that in many other communist countries. Persecution has not extinguished religion. The persistence of attacks on religious practices proves that, and there is other more specific evidence. No mosque or church is legally open for worship. But in *Hosteni* (The Ox Goad) for 12 May 1974 a correspondent records with horror that on a visit to Phoiniki in the district of Santi Quaranta, he found the old village church aglow with lights. He thought naturally that the products supposed to be stored in it must be in danger of fire, but when he gave the alarm, people just laughed and said "It is the candles for the souls". In secret, rites such as circumcision for the Muslims, baptism for the Christians and marriage for both continue to be celebrated, sometimes by Party members. And religious festivals such as Ramadan and Easter are kept. But Albania has two peculiarities which are hardly paralleled elsewhere in the communist world. As late as August 1962 the *Party Way* complained that the schools fail to give an atheistic education and, it would seem, many teachers refuse to teach atheism. That was 15 years ago and it will be interesting to see if this still happens. Finally, there is in Albania, as in some other parts of the Ottoman Empire, a tradition of secret religion. Some of those more or less forcibly converted to Islam retained their Christian faith and persisted in its secret practice generation after generation down to the beginning of this century, when Albania at last gained her independence. It is not surprising that in communist times, as in Turkish times, there are secret church buildings in cellars and attics or other hidden corners.

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Appendix

We print below extracts from *The Twilight of the Gods in Albania*, published by the Panepirotic Federation of America and Canada, 1976, pp. 64-66.

In an article in *The People's Tribune* of Argyrokastrò, dated 22 May 1975, Demetrios Kotsikas writes as follows:

"Places of worship (churches and mosques) may have been closed and in general the material base of religion eradicated after the Party's long struggle to enlighten the broad masses and educate them on atheistic principles. Nevertheless, the vestiges of religious ideas and beliefs still persist in people's minds and manifest themselves in a variety of ways. The truth of this has been con-

firmed once again in a public discussion which was held in the village of Tsouka in the province of Saranda. The discussion showed that not only religious ideas and concepts survive but also religious objects, icons, books etc., which help to maintain these beliefs. In spite of the fact that the vestiges of religion have taken some hard blows - not just on the level of ideas and concepts but equally on the level of the cultural expression of these ideas - they are still alive in Tsouka. This is evident above all in the continued observance of certain rules affecting every aspect of the daily life of the community, rules which are connected with religious doctrine. It is not uncommon, for example, for rice to be

thrown over the bridal couple in the course of a wedding, even though the ceremony is not conducted by a priest. Elderly people fast. When a death occurs religious rules are observed, the so-called prayers of the third, ninth and fourteenth days. And when someone dies, the villagers do not go out to work. Quite by chance icons, religious books and other ecclesiastical objects have been found in the house of a former *kulak* of the village." The writer concludes: "It is the duty of the Democratic Front and of all the mass organizations to improve the standard of atheistic propaganda."

In the July 1975 volume of the official Party organ, *Rruga e Partise*, we find a full confession of the failure of anti-religious propaganda. "This is what Houloua Hizmo writes:

"We may state emphatically that the Cultural Institute of the town of Gramsi and the schools of that district have not carried out a careful study on a firm factual basis, since even in recent times the following practices have been confirmed: candles have been lit in former holy places of worship and coins left by certain persons as votive offerings. Moreover, in some families red eggs are used, amulets are hung round the necks of children, and prayers are said to ward off illness. If this subject has really been studied in depth, why do some women in the villages of Grabov, Koukour, Porytsan, Kotor etc. not do any washing on Fridays, and why do some girls who have embroidery lessons on Fridays not take up

a needle to do any sewing or embroidery? The vestiges of religion cannot be obliterated from people's minds like material objects which can be smashed and thrown on the ground. On the death of a loved one at Valbona in the province of Bayram Tsouri pressure was exerted for the inclusion of Halva in the funeral meal. As this suggestion was not acceptable to those taking part, the supporter of the traditional religious point of view suggested instead that 'Halva with honey' should be prepared. As this suggestion was not acceptable either, people began whispering and urging that a 'secret memorial service' should be held. The service took place on the pretext that 'the deceased would cause schizophrenia if he did not receive these honours'."

The writer continues: "We should not be satisfied with the abolition of the external signs of religion, such as religious rites or festive meals on name-days, or with the destruction of television aerials found in some homes bent into the shape of a cross. We should make scientific attempts to prove the vanity of religious opinions. There are no longer any actual mosques or churches. Nevertheless, we are bound to stress that there are still people who have turned a part of their house into a small chapel, and there are still those who pray in the gardens, in the forests and in the mountains. When our vigilance slackens, these religious manifestations take on an open character, as has happened at Rangam, Seldi and other villages in the province of Skodra."

ERRATA

In *RCL* Vol. 5, No. 4, 1977, p. 263, 2nd col. line 5, "Vityazya of the Tigerskin" should read "The *Knight* of the Tigerskin".

In the same issue of *RCL*, the caption opposite p. 248, "Nijole Sadunaite with her father, whom she nursed until his death in 1974" should read "Nijole Sadunaite with Fr. P. Rauda, a Lithuanian Roman Catholic priest, whom she nursed until his death in 1974". Fr. Rauda was deeply revered by Lithuanian Catholics. Large numbers attended his funeral which became a demonstration on behalf of the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church. *Ed.*